

Palestinians welcome Biden decision to reverse Trump policies

Author:

Thu, 2021-01-28 02:42

ATLANTA: Palestinian leaders have welcomed the announcement that US President Joe Biden plans to resume diplomatic ties with the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah and restore US aid for the Palestinian people.

Richard Mills, the acting US ambassador to the UN, told the UN Security Council that the Biden administration intends to fully restore diplomatic relations and reinstate economic and humanitarian aid that was blocked by the Trump administration.

Palestinian government spokesman Ibrahim Milhem said that President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh welcome the announcement, which emphasized US support for a two-state solution and the importance of a return to negotiations between Israel and Palestine.

He added that the Palestinian leadership is keen for negotiations to resume, based on mutually agreed UN resolutions and the principles of international law that demand an end to Israeli occupation and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

"We are ready to resume diplomatic negotiations with Israel, with the help of international parties, based on international laws and UN resolutions," he said. "Any solution, however, that does not take into account Palestinian rights as enshrined by international laws and UN agreements will fail."

Wasel Abu Yousef, a senior member of the Palestine Liberation Organization, said that Palestinians realize the Biden administration has signaled a clear break from Trump's policies, while also being aware of its continuing, unequivocal support for Israel.

"What the Palestinians really want is a clear path toward ending the Israeli occupation and the establishment of their state, not a policy of conflict management in the way it was done for eight years under the administration of former President Barack Obama," he said.

Trump halted US economic aid to the Palestinian Authority, worth \$200 million, and more than \$350 million of humanitarian aid provided through the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), after Palestinian leaders rejected Trump administration policies they believed denied the Palestinian people their rights and violated previous international agreements.

Mills said the decision by the Biden administration was made to improve the lives of ordinary Palestinians and Israelis.

"We do not view these steps as a favor to the Palestinian leadership," he

said. "US assistance benefits millions of ordinary Palestinians and helps to preserve a stable environment that benefits both Palestinians and Israelis."

He also stressed the Biden administration's "steadfast support for Israel" but added that it will support efforts to reach a mutually agreed two-state solution in which Israel lives in peace and security alongside a viable Palestinian state.

Democratic US Congresswoman Marie Newman, who represents Illinois's 3rd congressional district in the House of Representatives, said that the decision to restore ties with the Palestinians is a step in the right direction on the path to peace and prosperity for Palestinians and Israelis.

"I am extremely hopeful that with the new Biden administration's intentions and efforts to re-establish UNRWA funding, oppose illegal land annexation, and resume peace talks with the Palestinian leadership, that we will have a clearer path to peace, justice and prosperity in the region for both the Palestinian and Israeli people."

Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem during the 1967 war and has refused to abide by numerous UN resolutions calling on it to end the occupation. In 1994 the Israelis and Palestinians signed the Oslo Accords, which stipulated the end of the occupation and the eventual establishment of a viable Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Under the Trump administration, the US government in 2017 recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and moved its embassy there from Tel Aviv, in violation of international law that does not recognize Israeli sovereignty over the holy city.

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[Tunisian press syndicate raps police over night arrest](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-01-28 01:49

TUNIS: Tunisian police slapped and arrested a photojournalist working at night despite his having an authorization to be out after curfew, the national press syndicate said on Wednesday amid criticism of the security forces' handling of protests.

Islem Hkiri, a freelance photographer, was charged with breaking curfew and assaulting a public servant.

He had earlier published pictures of police using pepper spray during a

recent surge of protests in Tunisia, a democracy since the 2011 revolution that inspired the "Arab spring." Protesters have decried both inequality and police abuses.

Security forces have arrested more than 1,200 people including many under the age of 18 and have widely used teargas against demonstrators. Although daytime protests have mostly been peaceful, those at night have involved repeated clashes with police as well as some looting.

The Journalists' Syndicate condemned police violence and asked the Interior Ministry for an immediate investigation.

An Interior Ministry spokesman said he could not comment on a file in the hands of the judiciary.

A judicial official was not immediately available for comment.

Tunisian rights groups have criticized what they call the police's aggressive handling of protesters and the arrest of bloggers.

The opposition and activists also criticized the unprecedented security measures and restrictions on the freedom to demonstrate, and the closure of streets in the capital against protests on Tuesday.

They accused the prime minister of seeking to restore a security state like that which existed before the 2011 uprising.

Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi said the government wanted to protect property but would defend the right to protest, a freedom gained after revolution.

A video showed a policeman firing tear gas at a man who appeared from his house during recent clashes. It sparked anger and doubts about the credibility of police reform over the past decade.

Suspicious powder

The office of Tunisia's president has received a letter containing suspicious powder and is investigating the matter, a source there said on Wednesday.

President Kais Saied did not open the letter and is in good health, the source said.

Some local websites reported that the lethal toxin ricin had been found in the envelope, and that it had been addressed to the presidency in the Carthage Palace.

The source in the office declined to comment on the reports.

Factional tensions have been growing within the government, amid protests.



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Tunisians protest arrests; government faces confidence vote
Hundreds protest police repression in Tunisia

[Parkour brings youngsters a taste of freedom in Gaza](#)

Thu, 2021-01-28 01:44

GAZA: Using crutches, Palestinian Mohamed Aliwa leaps from one concrete slab to another, determined that his missing leg won't stop him doing parkour, a sport that brings respite from grim reality in Gaza.

The Palestinian teen's right leg was amputated near the knee in 2018 after he was hit by Israeli army fire during protests along the fortified border separating the Gaza Strip from Israel.

Along with his lower leg, he lost his dream of being a professional parkour athlete, he said.

But watching his friends jumping from obstacle to obstacle, the 18-year-old,

who now sometimes makes use of a prosthetic limb, decided that his disability shouldn't bring his moves to an end.

"I asked my friends to help me walk, and little by little I came to move and jump almost like them," he said, talking in a rehabilitation center which he visits at least once a week.

Parkour, an extreme sport also known as free-running, originated in France in the 1990s.

It involves navigating urban obstacles using a fast-paced mix of jumping, vaulting, running and rolling.

"Sometimes I feel frustrated," says Aliwa. "But I told myself that if I could do that (again), then everything else in my life would be easy."

He says the sport gives him "incredible energy."

In Gaza, young people have been practicing parkour for years, bounding from ruin to ruin in an enclave pockmarked by three wars between Israel and Hamas, which has ruled Gaza since 2007.

But even the easiest jump carries risks, and that is why Jihad Abu Sultan, 32, opened what he says is the "first parkour academy in the Palestinian territories," with the support of French sporting goods giant Decathlon.

"I started doing parkour in 2005," he said at his club in Al-Shati refugee camp, near Gaza City.

"At the time, we didn't have a dedicated space, we trained in cemeteries and on the ruins of buildings destroyed by Israel."

Abu Sultan says that the sport was practiced by individuals on an ad hoc basis until two months ago, when he came together with fellow enthusiasts to establish the club, which they call "Wallrunners." It teaches the sport "in a safe way, far from the dangers of the street," he said.

It has a modest budget but already has some 70 members, including seven girls, who can jump from one wooden block to another, perform somersaults and swing on parallel bars.

On the ground are rubber mats, to soften falls. The Gaza Strip has been under Israeli blockade for more than a decade and unemployment is about 50 percent, rising to 65 percent among young people, according to the World Bank.

For some, Parkour shines a ray of light into what is a dreary existence.

"For a generation of young Palestinians who have grown up in a flood of under-employment, it has become a method of self-expression, an escape, and a way of life," says the Wallrunners website in English.



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Gazans run free with parkour More than 20 injured by blast in Gaza home

[Vaccines vs. variants: Israel's exit from pandemic hangs in balance](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-01-28 01:17

JERUSALEM: Israel's plan to parlay its COVID-19 vaccination drive into an exit from the pandemic next month hangs in the balance as new variants of the virus have spurred an increase in infections, a senior official said on Wednesday.

Highly infectious foreign variants are currently flooding Israeli hospitals with serious cases and the newly developed vaccines have yet to be proven fully effective against them, Deputy Health Minister Yoav Kisch said.

Israel currently leads the world on per capita vaccinations, having inoculated about 30 percent of its population of 9 million with at least one dose.

"We are in a war with very low intelligence (about the enemy)," Kisch, a former fighter pilot, said. "That means that things are changing as we go. The enemy is using different tactics and different methods that we are not fully aware of."

Israel began vaccinating high-risk groups on Dec. 19 in what Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu predicted would provide them with full protection by the end of this month and enable the economy to begin reopening in February.

But despite expanded eligibility criteria for the Pfizer Inc. vaccines and the imposition of a third national lockdown, infections and deaths are surging.

"We're in an arms race – except it's not an arms race, it's a race between vaccination and mutation," Netanyahu said on Wednesday at a virtual meeting of the World Economic Forum.

Governments worldwide "should probably expect the companies that are producing the vaccines at this point to modify their vaccines to accommodate the mutations that they don't cover now," said Netanyahu, who is up for reelection on March 23.

Israel's projections of a vaccine-fueled turnaround last week proved false, Kisch said. Now it is hoping to see in the coming two weeks a reduction in morbidity as well as solid research data showing that the vaccines defeat the variants.

"We are optimistic because, as of now, the knowledge regarding this vaccine is (that it is) effective against them," said Kisch, a lawmaker in Netanyahu's Likud party.

If that is correct, that means a delay of only two to four weeks in Israel's planned exit from the pandemic, he said. If not, Israel could be facing a further delay of six to eight months.

"We'll have to wait for a new development of a vaccine that will give the answer against this mutation," Kisch said.

Israel's Interior Ministry announced on Wednesday that the country's land crossings with Jordan and Egypt would be closed to travelers, in a bid to curb the spread of coronavirus.

The decision follows the shutdown of the country's international airport, which took effect on Tuesday.

"To complete the joint efforts to prevent the increase in morbidity, Interior Minister Arye Deri announced that the land crossings will be closed to Israelis and foreigners," the ministry said in a statement.



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Gunman fires at Israeli officers in Jerusalem's Old City, is shot dead
Israel to ban incoming passenger flights to contain COVID-19 spread

[Top US diplomat Blinken sees long road to Iran deal](#)

Author:

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Wed, 2021-01-27 21:30

WASHINGTON: The United States will only return to the Iran nuclear deal once Tehran meets its commitments, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Wednesday, warning of a long road until verification.

On his first full day as the top US diplomat, Blinken confirmed President Joe Biden's willingness to return to the deal trashed by his predecessor but rejected Iranian pressure for the United States to act first.

"Iran is out of compliance on a number of fronts. And it would take some time, should it make the decision to do so, for it to come back into

compliance and time for us then to assess whether it was meeting its obligations,” Blinken told a news conference.

“We’re not there yet, to say the least.”

Former president Donald Trump bolted from a 2015 nuclear deal negotiated under former president Barack Obama and instead slapped punishing sanctions. Iran responded by reducing its compliance with the deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), under which it was promised economic relief for major curbs in its contested nuclear program.

“President Biden has been very clear in saying that if Iran comes back into full compliance with its obligations under the JCPOA, the United States would do the same thing,” Blinken said.

But Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has demanded that the United States first come into compliance by ending the Trump sanctions, which include a sweeping effort to end Tehran’s key export of oil.

Iranian officials fear that the United States – where Trump’s Republican Party, narrowly in the minority in Congress, remains adamantly opposed to the nuclear deal – will not fulfill sanctions relief even if Tehran goes ahead.



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